

RADIO TV REPORTS, INC.

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FOR PUBLIC AFFAIRS STAFF

PROGRAM CBS Nightwatch STATION WDVM-TV
CBS Network

DATE January 10, 1985 2:00 A.M. CITY Washington, D.C.

SUBJECT Soviet Television

CHARLIE ROSE: The Soviet Union has been described as a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma. In short, the West gets very few true glimpses of the real Russia. But now, through the use of satellite technology, a whole array of Soviet culture is opening up to Kremlinologists in this country. Faculty and students at Columbia University have been watching and recording direct broadcasts of Soviet television since the beginning of October. They've been seeing everything the Soviets see, from newscasts to drama series.

Here to tell us about the project is Jonathan Sanders of the University's Harriman Institute for Russian Studies.

I guess it was Churchill who said the Soviet Union is a riddle wrapped inside of a...

JONATHAN SANDERS: He didn't have a whole lot of information about the Soviet Union. We haven't had a lot, really, in late of the United States [sic]. We've been reading Pravda and Izvestia, the Soviet newspapers, and lots of regional newspapers. But we haven't been paying attention to the main source of mass media, television.

If you think about it, television reaches an awful lot of people in the United States.

ROSE: And it's a reflection of the culture of a nation.

SANDERS: Absolutely.

ROSE: So tell me how you got started in this. I mean was this Jonathan Sanders sitting there one day saying, "Wouldn't

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it be nice if you could see Soviet television"?

SANDERS: I was with one of my friends in Moscow watching a movie one night, and I was just intoxicated enough on vodka to think I was back in New York watching Soviet TV. When I got back to New York I started thinking about how important television is to our perception of the United States, how words like "Archie Bunker mentality" and a whole range of other things have crept into our language. And I started thinking, "Gee, the Soviet Union's even a bigger country than ours, and we don't watch Soviet television. Maybe it has something to tell us and to teach us."

I then started looking around for somebody who could help me understand the technology of this. I found a wonderful electronics nut, a man who used to work with Jimi Hendrix and invented the wireless microphone, a guy named Ken...

ROSE: We're not talking about a Ph.D. in electronics, are we?

SANDERS: No, we're talking about a free-lancer par excellence, the type of man who couldn't exist in the Soviet Union, somebody who does everything on his own, a real inventive genius.

ROSE: Self-taught genius.

And so you get this big satellite earth station, or dish, and you somehow set it up so that you get what, how many hours a day?

SANDERS: We get about 15 hours a day. We get the broadcast that goes from Moscow out to Novosibirsk, which is in Central Siberia, and then farther out to Eastern Siberia and Vladivostok.

So we start by watching the evening news, and then we get morning exercises, and then...

ROSE: Morning exercises?

SANDERS: Morning exercises, and it keeps us healthy and fit. You can see I've lost weight. And then we get to see programs about cooking, programs about the Second World War. We get to see a good deal of Soviet movies. There are some wonderful movies, excellent sports, teleplays about contemporary life, and some really drab and dismal scenes of agriculture and industry. I know more about agriculture than I ever wanted to know.

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ROSE: I bet a lot about agriculture.

Let's take a look at one of the excerpts from Soviet television, in this case a Soviet news broadcast. Here we go. Tell me what we're seeing.

SANDERS: This is the opening of the evening news. This is nationally broadcast, and this is the great stage set of Red Square. And the commentators begin by saying, "Good evening. Hello, Comrades." And then they start with the official news of the government, what Chernenko said. And sometimes they will read a whole speech of Chernenko. They will read it for 15 minutes or 20 minutes or 30 minutes or 40 minutes. And that is deadly dull television, but they have to get the official communique out.

ROSE: Are the people that we saw there the stars of Soviet television?

SANDERS: They have a rotating group of five or six different commentators, anchor people. You'll notice that they're not particularly effective in the looks department, and they don't select their people for high cheekbones. They don't use teleprompters. The microphones are standing right up there. The production values are simple and straightforward.

But on their news, news is important. Soviet television is serious. If they think they have 30 minutes of news, they show 30 minutes. But if they have 66 minutes of news, they stretch the newscast to fit the news, not compress the news to fit the time frame.

ROSE: That's something all American journalists would like a lot.

Is it most -- it's all propoaganda. I mean there's...

SANDERS: It's not all propaganda, Charlie. There were reports that could have been straightforward from the U.S. media. For instance, the way they reported the result of the second presidential debate. They said there was another presidential debate, that the Presidnt said some things, the Vice President Mondale said other things. The consensus of journalists was --then they said what the consensus of journalists was, and left it at that. That's not so much propaganda, that's straightforward news.

But what they choose to show and what they choose not to show very much slants the news. They're in control. Bad things don't happen in the Soviet Union. Car wrecks, train accidents, McDonald's massacres only go on in the West.

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ROSE: And they emphasize those kinds of things. I mean I've seen that in the reporting that comes here from Izvestia and some of the -- and Tass and the rest of them.

Let me take a look at another excerpt coming from Soviet television, and you'll see -- what are we seeing?

SANDERS: Oh, this is another one of those great programs about how industry is fulfilling the new five year plan, they're building wonderful tractors, and the tractors are going to go out and help build Soviet agriculture. And this is to encourage belief that the work on the five year plan is going ahead, that people are working enthusiastically. And it's the kind of industry-on-parade approach. There is an awful lot of this: emphasis on positive values, emphasis on work, emphasis on new productive techniques, and sometimes criticism of old technology and old productive techniques.

ROSE: How about criticism of the failure of Soviet agricultural policy over the last five years, headed by Mr. Gorbachev, who's now said to be number two?

SANDERS: No. You get criticism on Soviet television, but of specific isolated kind of events, especially those that involve daily life. But big political issues within the country are not tackled. You get inferences of political issues. You see the reflection of Soviet public opinion of that very small stratum of people who help decide what's going on. We've seen a resurgence of anti-humanitarianism. We've seen a resurgence of anti-Zionism. Twice I've seen press conferences of the Soviet Anti-Zionist Committee, which has anti-Zionist and anti-Semitic overtones. You see a resurgence of kind of neo-Stalinism, yearning for the strongman on the top.

ROSE: Have they reported the return of Svetlana --Stalin's daughter, Svetlana...

SANDERS: Just in a line. It hasn't gotten the kind of publicity that it gets here, in part because Soviet television, for the most part, aims at issues, not personality. They don't have the People magazine approach to life. They have the broad analytical approach or broad propagandistic approach, or simply broad social approach. Individuals aren't singled out, except if they take a character and create one to stand for a particular social phenomenon.

ROSE: I should mention, as we go out to the break here, about the video that we're seeing is not on loan from you because you won't loan us your video, for reasons I will explain. This is some excerpts we took from the CBS Bureau in Moscow.

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SANDERS: And it proved to me that we're seeing the same thing here that our correspondent in Moscow was seeing there.

ROSE: Our friend Jonathan Sanders has been here many times, will be here many more times, talking about Soviet television. Is it a reflection of their culture and their way of life?

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ROSE: Doing some unique things at the Harriman Institute at Columbia University, where you've got this satellite and you're taking in the Soviet broadcasts.

Why couldn't we borrow your tape rather than having to send to our bureau to get...

SANDERS: There are two reasons, Charlie. First of all, the Soviets don't broadcast in the same technical standards we do. They broadcast in something called modified SECAM, and we've had to build special decoders and all kinds of equipment to...

ROSE: The genius who used to work with Jimi Hendrix did that.

SANDERS: And the second reason is that this is in a fuzzy areas of international communications law, and we're being as conservative as we can in the use of this. We're doing this right now for our own scholarly and pedagogical reasons. We have students flocking in to watch the evening news to improve their Russian, to learn about sports games. We're beginning to do content analysis of Soviet television. But we're limiting it to this kind of scholarly investigation where we can keep control over it and where we know that Soviet television, a Soviet source isn't being used here for ways that we can't control.

ROSE: Sure.

All right, let's take a look at another excerpt from Soviet television, and where you will see the experience that some people say seared the Soviet mind-set more than any other experience.

SANDERS: The Soviet experience is really formed now based on the Second World War. And we see information, films all the time about it on Soviet television.

This happens to be a piece about what happened 40 years ago in the liberation of a town on the Romanian-Polish border by Soviet troops.

The Soviets really put a large emphasis on the war

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because it reflects all those positive values that they want to have, where there was natural and spontaneous support for the state, where there was enthusiasm, where everyone felt united. There was a great sense of purpose. And there's an underlying theme there too. They were allies. They were allies with the United States then.

And it's this constant repetition of the Second World War, it's one of the things that reinforces the common Soviet attitude that they like American people. They may not like our government, but they like us as individuals and as a group of citizens.

ROSE: Interesting too, I guess, if you're going to resurrect Stalin and do some neo-Stalinization, the war's a good place to start because he was their wartime leader and the wartime hero.

SANDERS: Absolutely. And whatever mistakes people can say he made, they say, "But when push came to shove, when national existence was on the line, he led us." Now, that may not be true. It may be that they won the war in spite of Stalin, not because of Stalin. But myth and reality really get confused in people's memories.

ROSE: It happened on his watch.

Let's take a look at another clip. This is showing a story about Nicaragua, right here.

SANDERS: Oh, this is fascinating. This was a piece...

ROSE: This is the quality of...

SANDERS: This is a piece about the CIA report about assassins in Nicaragua. Look carefully because the Soviets showed footage taken from -- this is CBS footage with the logo in English reinforcing the image that Americans are spies.

ROSE: I remember this report. Yeah, I remember this video.

SANDERS: Look in the upper-right-hand corner. There's the -- there's the adda (?) done by CBS and the CIA logo in the upper-hand. It's not only a report about an American problem, this assassination book, but it also sends a subliminal message: Americans are spies.

And there's another interesting thing, of course. They used footage from American television to reinforce...

ROSE: But where did they get the footage?

SANDERS: I don't know, Charlie. That's a very good question. I'd like to find out. They don't put much American television on. You see occasionally clips like this on Soviet television.

ROSE: My assumption is they buy it. I mean I think I've heard that they do occasionally buy material from the networks.

SANDERS: Well, this was a good purchase. They got a lot of ruble for their purchase here.

ROSE: All right, let's take a look at another clip. This is from -- this is entertainment television we're going to take a look at now, but still television with a message. This is the famous miniseries.

SANDERS: This is "Moscow Has Authorized Us to Report," a series with great production values, kind of James Bondish, about American spies in the Soviet Union.

ROSE: This is an American.

SANDERS: Yeah.

ROSE: What's he saying?

SANDERS: They're talking about his past, what he's been doing in conspiring to arrange for some kind of revolution in an unnamed African country. And this is a wonderful production. People were glued to their television sets all over the Soviet Union this summer. It was quite a phenomenon.

ROSE: Big Nielsen ratings in the Soviet Union?

SANDERS: High Nielsen ratings. Of course, there's not a lot of competition there, you know.

ROSE: You will watch this, or else. Yeah. But it got a lot of talk, a lot of conversation in the Soviet press and...

SANDERS: A lot of talk. It was commented on. People, ordinary Soviet citizens talked about it a great deal. I was there this summer and people would say, "Did you see it? What did you think? Was it true this person was a spy?" And in fact, it was based, kind of loosely, on an incident where there was an American spy...

ROSE: Okay. Having looked at all these tapes, Dr. Sanders, and having watched -- I mean you've become an addict. I can see your wife saying, "Jonathan, come to bed, come to bed."

And you're saying, "Wait a minute. You can't believe what I'm watching." How has it changed your own -- how has it added to or changed your own conception of Soviet society, culture, communication?

SANDERS: What it's done, Charlie, is it's given me a much wider appreciation for mass culture and popular culture. Like a lot of intellectuals, I concentrate on life at the top: newspapers, what good writers are writing, what's going on at the Bolshoi Ballet. This is popular culture. This is what the Archie Bunkers of the Soviet Union watch. And in seeing a lot more of this mass culture, this popular culture, I've seen a wide diversity, much wider than I would have imagined, reflecting a whole range of different kind of values, seeing how life in the Soviet Union gets reinforced, not in one heavy-handed push from above, but in little atoms of particular elements of people's lives. Whether it's the problems of divorced women or people going out into the countryside or drunks or production, it all is reinforced. People are taught much more by television.

And it's also shown me some of the alternatives that we might want to consider adopting from Soviet television.

ROSE: Like?

SANDERS: Well, some of the ways they choose people to be on television: because they have good voices, they can read well, and not necessarily because they have pretty faces.

ROSE: Jonathan Sanders is with the Harriman Institute.

My friend, nice to have you here. Interesting video.